

The Effects of Multicultural Priming on Children's Identity

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Abstract

The present study examined how a person's social context can influence his or her self-construal. It was hypothesized that individuals whose multicultural identity is formed by parents from distinctly different cultural backgrounds will define themselves differently based upon social context. Specifically, the responses of adolescents who were raised in a context that made one parent more salient than the other has been investigated. Thus, it was expected that in this situation they would demonstrate a self-construal consistent with the cultural orientation of that parent. Participants were upper level students at three international schools on the island of Mallorca. In support of our hypothesis, it was found that for children raised by two parents, one from a collectivist orientation and the other from an individualist orientation, priming them to think about their collectivist parent activated an interdependent self-construal whereas priming them to think about their individualist parent activated an independent self-construal.

Keywords

Multicultural Identity; Priming; Children's Identity; Identity Formation; Individualism; Collectivism; Bi-Culturalism

Introduction

When Margaret Mead (1928/1961) wrote *Coming of Age in Samoa*, she described a situation where a single cultural tradition led to "one girl's life being so much like another's" (p. 11). Growing up in a single cultural tradition is becoming more and more unusual today. In fact, in today's global world, it is more common for individuals to internalize more than one culture, speak more than one language, live in a multicultural community and have ties to individuals whose nationalities are different from their own. According to Miller (2010), several factors contribute to our exposure to an increasingly broad range of cultural influences, including globalization, cross-cultural marriages, immigration, and the growing number of multicultural societies. In this study, the focus will be

put on the sense of identity developed by children of cross-cultural marriages.

How do we form a sense of identity? Harry Stack Sullivan (1953) noted the importance of parenting when he suggested that interactions with significant others was the primary source of a person's identity. Eric Erikson (1964,1966), one of the earliest and most influential theorists examined the process of identity formation, making the point that culture provides people with an appropriate range of social roles from which it can be selected who they will become and also a process by which they can validate their identity by providing a means of recognizing themselves in their chosen role. How this works when an individual grows up in a multicultural environment is the question this study was designed to answer.

Cultural differences in how we understand ourselves in relationship to other people have received considerable attention from cross-cultural researchers. In cross-cultural research, the term self-construal is often used instead of identity. Self-construal is the awareness of our thoughts and feelings that provides an understanding of our private inner self: Markus and Kitayama's (1991) theory of divergent self-construals attempted to expand upon the limited "Western" view of the self held by many contemporary researchers.

Based upon research delineating cross-cultural differences in the views of personhood, Markus & Kitayama (1991) proposed that self-construals could be divided into two distinct conceptual representations of the self: independent and interdependent. Although some aspects of the self may be universal, they asserted that the fundamental nature of the self-construal is inextricably bound to the culture in which the individual was reared. Independent self-construals that emphasize the uniqueness of every individual are,

according to Markus and Kitayama (1991), generally representative of individuals in Western cultures, while individuals in non-Western cultures are more likely to possess interdependent self-construals that emphasize the connectedness of the individual to others. The independent self-construal views the self as an autonomous entity whose own thoughts, feelings, and actions are of utmost importance. Other people are important largely as a basis for social comparison, and the realization of internal attributes and accomplishment of personal goals are viewed as highly desirable states. In contrast, many cultures categorized as non-Western (e.g., China) are characterized as collectivist, focusing on the inherent connectedness of the individual to others. The interdependent construal of self is derived from this belief, viewing the self as an integral part of the social relationships in which one is engaged, and recognizing that thoughts, feelings, and actions are directly related to those of others with whom the person interacts. Relationships with others are integral to self-definition, as is the ability to maintain harmony in such social relationships (by engaging in appropriate actions, filling proper roles, and promoting the goals and needs of the group/others). In one representative study, Parkes, Schneider, and Bochner (1999) found that individualists are more likely to employ autonomous self-descriptions (referring to their own internal attributes), while collectivists are more likely to describe themselves with social references (referring to group membership or to other people). Markus and Kitayama (1991) posited that these divergent views of the self play a crucial role in the organization of one's self-regulatory schemata and the interpretation of one's experiences, leading to a variety of consequences. One's self-construal can affect cognitive, emotional, and motivational processes. Likewise, the self is also the product of the social experiences to which it is exposed, especially those of culture, which Cross and Madson (1997) pointed out provide a continually evolving and dynamic presence.

As cultural boundaries become increasingly more flexible in today's world, the number of intercultural marriages and the children of such unions have increased. Rather than being instructed in the cultural expectations of one particular culture, children of

these cross-cultural marriages are exposed to aspects of both cultures. When parents are of two distinctly different cultures—for example, one culture emphasizing an independent self-construal and one culture promoting an interdependent view of the self—children are likely to receive conflicting points of view. Matsumoto (2000) has suggested that under such circumstances, children may develop multicultural identities, resulting in the existence of multiple psycho-cultural systems of representations in the minds of such individuals. Children of mixed marriages will incorporate this multicultural identity in one of three ways when developing a sense of self. They could draw upon aspects of both cultures, utilizing a mixture of independent and interdependent self-construals in which neither culture is represented in a robust manner. Alternatively, these children may develop a strong sense of identification to both cultures, providing an exemplar of each. Another possibility is that children with multicultural identities will develop a sense of self that depends upon the context. These individuals may be encouraged to utilize aspects of either an independent or an interdependent self-construal, depending upon the social or cultural situation. A study by Oyserman (1993) suggested the final possibility, documenting the existence of both individualistic and collectivistic tendencies in response to differing aspects of the self among Arab and Israeli Jewish students in Israel, an area that, while traditionally considered collectivist, has been exposed to individualistic beliefs throughout its history of contact with cultures of the Western world. Oyserman (1993) asserted that individualism and collectivism are both culturally and situationally based.

If individuals with multicultural identities do indeed develop both independent and interdependent self-construals, which are then utilized differently, based upon the situation, priming for one or the other should result in a shift in self-construal consistent with the prime. Gardner, Gabriel, and Lee (1999) found that such a shift does occur. They presented European Americans with both independent and interdependent primes. Primes consist of stimuli that influence responses to later stimuli. For example, an individual could be primed with the word *table* and then asked the meaning of the word *chair*. In that situation, they are unlikely to think of the chair of a committee and

more likely to think of a kitchen chair. In the Gardner et al. (1999) study, the participants who were primed with interdependence described themselves with a relatively greater proportion of interdependent statements than did those who were primed with independence. In addition, the participants primed with interdependence also made value endorsements and social judgments that were consistent with interdependent self-construals. They also found that the greatest shift in value endorsements occurred when participants were given a prime that was in contrast with that encouraged by their own cultural context. Of particular relevance to the present study, Maxwell (1998) found that the children of cross-cultural marriages could move between two distinct identities as a result of context, age, and the need to conform to a particular reference group.

The present study examined the malleability of self-construal among individuals with multicultural identities. Specifically, it was hypothesized that children who are raised by two parents—one parent from an individualistic culture and one parent from a collectivistic culture—will define themselves differently based upon cultural context. If the individual is primed for a particular cultural orientation, the individual will likely perceive him/herself in terms of the self-construal consistent with that orientation rather than the other.

Method

Participants

One hundred twenty-three upper division high school students (59 boys and 64 girls) from three international schools on the Spanish island of Mallorca participated. Mallorca was chosen as the location for the study because, as suggested by Waldren (1998), the thriving tourism industry on the island has resulted in many mixed marriages during the past several decades. Parents of the participants represented 27 nationalities, in which Spanish, British, and German were the most frequent. Based on Hofstede's (1980) Country Individualism Index (IDV), participants were classified into three groups. As the possible range of IDV scores is 0 to 100, for the sake of convenience participants whose parents were from countries with an IDV score of 51 or less (the mean score was 51) were classified as collectivist, while participants whose parents were both from countries with an IDV score

higher than 51 were classified as individualist. Countries that were not represented on Hofstede's IDV were classified based on work by Triandis (1995), Robert, Probst, Martocchio, Drasgow, and Lawler (2000), and Manrai, Lascu, Manrai, and Babb (2001). Under this system of categorization, 43 participants had parents who were both from countries classified as individualist, 49 had parents who were both from countries classified as collectivistic, and 32 had one parent from an individualistic country and the other parent from a collectivistic country.

Materials

The priming instrument was a questionnaire that asked participants several open-ended questions about either their father or their mother, including country in which the parent was born, raised, and educated, stories or anecdotes, work history, significant events, and personality. This questionnaire was designed to manipulate the cultural context by encouraging participants to think about the character of that particular parent as well as situations that were representative of the parent's native culture. The Singelis (1994) Self-Construal Scale consisting of two subscales—each measuring independent and interdependent self-construal—was utilized. This instrument presented 28 questions that were answered on a seven-point Likert scale. Four of these items were excluded from the analysis, as they were filler items. An example of a question targeting independent self-construal would be "I enjoy being unique and different from others in many respects"; while that targeting interdependent self-construal would be "I often have the feeling that my relationships with others are more important than my own accomplishments."

Design and Procedure

After obtaining permission from the Headmasters of the Balears International School, Bellver College, and Queen's College in Mallorca, data collection was done during class time. The process ensured anonymity of the participants. To manipulate cultural context, participants first completed the priming instrument (randomly distributed). The independent variable, cultural context, was the orientation (individualist or collectivist) of the nationality of the particular parent for which the participant was primed. The Singelis (1994) Self-Construal Scale was then administered. The

scores on the independent and interdependent subscales were used as the dependent variables. Demographic data about the participants as well as the nationalities of both parents were collected after participants had completed both instruments.

Results

Analysis of variance indicated that participants whose parents were both from individualistic cultures scored higher on the independent subscale ($M = 5.12$) than children of collectivistic parents ($M = 4.61$), $F(1, 91) = 18.63$, $MSE = 5.76$, $p = .001$. Participants whose parents were both from collectivistic cultures scored higher on the interdependent subscale ($M = 5.13$) than children of individualistic parents ($M = 4.91$), $F(1, 91) = 3.60$, $MSE = 1.12$, $p = .06$.

Consistent with the hypothesis on priming, mixed-heritage participants primed to think about their individualistic parent perceived themselves as more independent ($M = 5.02$) than those primed to think about the collectivistic parent ($M = 4.49$), $F(1, 29) = 8.75$, $MSE = 2.10$, $p = .01$. Individuals primed by thinking about their collectivistic parent perceived themselves as more interdependent ($M = 5.25$) than those primed to think about the individualistic parent ($M = 4.59$), $F(1, 29) = 8.69$, $MSE = 3.24$, $p = .01$.

There is no evidence that multicultural individuals primed for individualism scored any differently on the independent subscale ($M = 5.02$) than did individuals whose parents were both from individualistic cultures ($M = 5.12$), $F(1, 57) = .33$, $MSE = .10$, $p = .57$, nor did multicultural individuals primed for collectivism score differently on the interdependent subscale ($M = 5.25$) than did individuals whose parents were both from collectivistic cultures ($M = 5.13$). This suggests that multicultural individuals do develop strong self-construals corresponding to the cultures of both parents, not a self-construal that blends aspects of the two into an aggregate version.

Conclusions

The results of the present study support the hypothesis that individuals whose parents are from distinctly different cultural backgrounds define themselves differently based upon cultural context. These children, who have been raised by one parent

from an individualistic culture and one parent from a collectivistic culture, do develop both an independent and an interdependent construal of the self that can be made salient through priming. In this study, context was manipulated by making the participants think about either their individualistic or collectivistic parent. Other methods of priming could be tested.

The finding that self-construal is a viable concept that can be measured and manipulated among high-school age children offers an insight into the developmental aspects of culture. At what age does the self-construal begin to form, and does one's construal of self change over the course of a lifetime? While many immigrants enter a period of acculturation in which their behaviors might become more like those of the host country, their perception of the self may remain the same. The age range of the present study also offered a unique advantage. Most studies draw participants from college populations as college students are a self-selected group; however, a high school sample is much more representative of the population as a whole.

Future work in this area could investigate contexts in which one parent's influence outweighs that of the other. Another possibility is that one self-construal is more dominant than the other in certain situations (e.g., multicultural individuals might utilize an independent view of the self in school situations but an interdependent view at home). Oyserman (1993) noted that such situations may differ from culture to culture. If this is the case, specifying the types of situations and corresponding self-construals could be very valuable for educators, employers, and businesspeople trying to encourage certain behaviors. Being sensitive to cultural differences and making an effort to utilize such information in order to motivate in the most effective manner possible can benefit all involved in cross-cultural exchanges, whether in cases of individual interaction or group contact.

The other field we should explore is the developmental effect of parenting in either an individualistic or collectivistic style. The difference between the subscale scores for children of collectivist parents and for multicultural children primed for their collectivist parent was greater than that of children raised by individualist parents and multicultural

children primed for their individualist parent. This finding suggests that a collectivistic style of parenting has a greater impact on children than does an individualistic style. Perhaps the emphasis on conforming to the group leads to repression of individualistic tendencies, which would explain the much lower scores on the independent subscale.

The results of this study point to the complex interaction between culture and the individual, as well as the dynamic nature of the self. A better understanding of the way in which the self is construed across cultures will aid in our understanding of and appreciation for cross-cultural differences in a variety of social behaviors.

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